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Kula and the Trobriand Islands: The Meaning and Power of Objects

Becky Tomlinson
Utah State University

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By

Becky Tomlinson

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Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor David Lancy	Department Honors Advisor David Lancy

Director of Honors Program

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Becky Tomlinson
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Just as a word in a foreign language must be interpreted for one who does not speak the language, a cultural artifact alone holds no significance or meaning for an outsider. Thus, for an object to be understood it cannot stand alone, but must be placed in context though time and space, and various layers of cultural meaning must be expounded. The word *lagim*, from the Kiriwina language, may be roughly translated as meaning "the splashboard of a Kula canoe". This translation may give the proper words from English that denote the object, but it still leaves much to question. For example, what is Kula? What is the function of a splashboard? Just as the concept of DNA may not be fully understood without first studying it's many components, for the importance of *lagim* to be comprehended, it's place of creation, it's function and significance for the culture of origin need to be considered.

Malinowski and the Kula Ring

Kula has been termed a reciprocal trading and exchange cycle, taking place between groups of islands to the north and east of Papua New Guinea, including the Marshall Bennett Islands, the Trobriand Islands, and the D'Entrecasteaux Islands. The first major anthropological work describing the rituals of Kula and the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands was *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Bronislaw Malinowski. He is renowned for his work among the Trobriand Islanders. His ethnographies constitute volumes and volumes of research, marking many important steps in the maturation of anthropological method and theory. Malinowski's book is a foundation of information and descriptions of the Kula and its associated activities and rituals. However, Malinowski, as a psychological functionalist, believed that all cultural institutions

function to meet the needs of the people and his work reflects this theoretical stance. He was not concerned with the symbolic meaning of Kula, or the artwork incorporated in every Kula canoe. For this reason, Argonauts contribution to the current discussion is the descriptive meat of the place and process of Kula.

Argonauts arose from somewhat serendipitous circumstances. What Malinowski intended to be a relatively brief trip to the South Pacific became a three-year stay in the Trobriand Islands, from 1915 to 1918. This change in plans was due to the negative relations between Poland, his home country, and Britain at the outbreak of war in Europe. The Trobriand Islands, as well as the other archipelagoes mentioned in the book, are located off the eastern tip of New Guinea. Kiriwina, where Malinowski lived and conducted his research, is the largest island in the group.

The main topic of *Argonauts* is the seemingly bizarre economic institution, which Malinowski labeled "the Kula Ring". Kula is the exchange of specific objects along predetermined, specific paths, following definite rules and ceremonies. It is not haphazard or unstructured. It is "a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character" (Malinowski:81). The objects exchanged are *mwali*, or arm-shells, and *soulava*, or necklaces, both made of specific types of seashell.

The exchange takes place on two levels: first, between individual men who live within the same Kula community or between men living in contiguous communities; and second, between two communities divided by sea. In the first, only one or two objects may be exchanged, and in the second, there may be over a thousand articles at a time. Each object can only be traded in one direction, necklaces always traveling in a clockwise direction, and arm-shells taking the opposite direction. Thus, the Kula can

correctly be called the "Kula ring" as trading of these objects follows a definite, closed circuit around the islands of the Kula district (Malinowski:93). In a more practical sense, if you were a participant in the Kula, those partners to your left that give you *mwali*, you would always give *soulava*, while partners to the other side would always give you *soulava*, and so on.

The necklaces and arm-shells are highly coveted *vaygu'a*, or valuables, that confer prestige and honor upon the individuals and communities through which they pass along the Kula circuit. Because no man in the Kula ever keeps an article for more than a year or two, according to Malinowski, these *vaygu'a* are not "owned" in the Western sense of the word. Neither are they owned to be used. Their value comes in their possession and the renown that his brings to a man or community (Malinowski:89). Malinowski compares their values to the Crown Jewels (88), or a trophy (95), for they are cherished for the history that surrounds them, rather than their economic or utilitarian value. To achieve success in Kula means acquiring a highly prized shell from a partner, and having the ability to attract partners that will also attract big shells that they will pass on to you, but not to actually "own" that shell.

There is an exception to this rule. Later researchers found that there are two types of Kula valuables, those "owned" by the Kula ring that will never leave, and *kitomu* or *kitoam*, which are individually owned and may be sold, "used as wealth for payments at marriages and deaths or for an expert to build a canoe" (Weiner:149) or, at the owners discretion, entered into Kula to begin a new path or partnership.

The theoretical framework with which Malinowski approached the Kula and Trobriand society is known as psychological functionalism (McGee:158) and for him, all

cultural institutions function to meet the needs of the people. While more recent anthropologists may disagree with Malinowski on details of the Kula, many agree with him on this one point: the Kula functions, at some levels, to meet a psychological need, for success in the Kula brings prestige and honor.

Along with a description of the actual exchange of *mwali* and *soulava* and the relationships between the men and communities who participate in the Kula, Malinowski takes great pains to describe all other associated activities and secondary aspects of the Kula. These activities include "the building of canoes, preparation of the outfit, the provisioning of the expedition, the fixing of dates and social organization of the enterprise," and, not to forget, the magic rites and ceremonies associated with each activity (Malinowski:99). An essential step in preparing for an overseas Kula voyage is the preparation of the canoe. Each canoe is repainted, has magic chanted over it to increase its speed and agility, and all other things necessary for success in Kula. Each canoe has four specially prow boards, two on each end of the canoe; these boards hold great importance for the voyage, as we shall see later.

According to Malinowski, each aspect of the Kula plays a role in contributing to the smooth functioning of the society. Indeed, Malinowski continually makes the point that the Kula is a big, complex, vast, interrelated institution, forming an organic whole (83). Malinowski's perspective was clearly influenced by the work of Herbert Spencer. He used the organic analogy to show how "various cultural beliefs and practices contributed to the smooth functioning of society while providing individual biological or psychological benefits" (McGee: 158). He also emphasizes that as one organic whole, the complexity of the system cannot be understood by those participating within it.

Although Malinowski sought "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of his world" (25), he believed that it takes an outsider to create a complete picture, showing all aspects of a society.

Because he saw each culture as one organic whole, to study only a portion or single institution of a society was bad science in Malinowski's eyes. "An Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organizastion cuts out an artificial field of inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work" (11). For this reason, he took care to describe in detail each aspect of Trobriand society involved in or affected by Kula. He discusses magic and the Kula, linguistic data, even accounting several Kula voyages, and mythology associated with Kula. The scope of his work is astounding. And yet, something is missing.

A feminist critique would say that Malinowski had failed at his own game, for he did not study the Trobriand culture in "all its aspects" (Malinowski:11). After reading *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* one can easily ask "where are the women and what are they doing while the men participate in the Kula and associated activities?" Certainly their roles are significant. Malinowski tells us that Trobriand society is matrilineal "that is, in tracing decent and settling inheritance, they follow the maternal line" (55). But in what other ways do women contribute to Trobriand culture and society?

Women, Yams, and Bundles: the work of Annette Weiner

Annette Weiner has critiqued Malinowski for ignoring women's roles in Trobriand society. Through her own field work in the Trobriand Islands she concluded that because Malinowski placed so much emphasis on "utilitarian and individualistic

concerns-for example, the seeking of political alliances and power" he "neglected systems of exchange that involve women and are related to a society's sense of intergenerational continuity" (Sass 1986:56). Weiner's work provides another window into Trobriand society and fills in some of the blanks left by Malinowski.

Though Weiner's work is not specifically about Kula, combined with *Argonauts* it gives us a more complete picture of life in the Trobriand Islands. We learn not only what it is like to prepare for and execute a Kula expedition, but also the day to day events in life: planting a garden, the tension in political relationships, parents caring for their children, and burring their dead. These things reveal the interconnections between the men's sphere, "the world of *kula*"(Weiner:157), and the women's sphere, the world of birth and death.

Her book, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea,* describes the life cycle of and focuses on specific events important in the life of every Trobriand Islander: birth, youth and the transition to marriage, and finally, death. Within this framework she expounds upon the role of women in Trobriand society and the renewal of matrilineality through the women's mortuary distribution. Her conclusion focuses on the power in objects such as yams, shells, and banana leaf bundles, objects that connect people in personal and political relationships, from marriage to kula, weaving the fabric of Trobriand society.

We all know the intensely personal pain experienced at the death of someone we love. There is a sense of loss and grief; an emptiness when we realize the person will not be a part of our future lives. For Trobrianders, death is more than a personal loss. It extends to the very core of the societal structure: the matrilineage. Throughout a person's

life, they create relationships, beginning with their parents, extending through family, business partnerships, political bonds, and on and on. They form ties through obligation and influence, kinship and marriage. Death severs all these ties. "Death is seen as destroying and calling into question all the relationships that a dead person worked so hard to develop throughout his or her life " (Weiner:49). Death can unravel the fabric of society that has taken a lifetime to form.

Trobrianders see every death as threatening the strength of the matrilineage. For example, "if a matrilineage is weakened through the death of a man, someone is deliberately trying to weaken the autonomy of the matrilineage's leader of chief, taking away his supporters and potential hers. Even greater fear is felt when girls of women of child-bearing age die, for then villagers believe that someone desires the destruction of the entire matrilineage itself. Without women to bear children, the matrilineage dies out and the property and even the rank of the lineage may be claimed by others. Each death brings these fears into sharp focus"(Weiner:35-36). An attack this serious must be answered with a show of strength, proving that the matrilineage is still strong and vigorous, while seeking to repair the ties that were severed by the death.

Weiner describes the ceremonies and rites associated with death as "intense work" (36), involving many, many people. The role a person will play, what mourning taboos they will observe, and the labor they are required to give is based on kinship. "The 'owners of the dead person's things' (*toliuli*) are those who are members of [the deceased's] matrilineage, assisted by other villages who belong to his clan...The 'workers' (*toliyouwa*) are villagers from other clans who are related to [the deceased] through marriage or patrilaterally" (36). The main workers are the deceased's wife and

father, and members of their matrilineages, his children, friends and political allies.

The following chart (Weiner:36) illustrates visually the main workers and owners. Kin obligations at death extend much further than this simple chart indicates. The work of death is carried out not only by the main workers and owners, but their matrilineal kin, children, friends and allies.

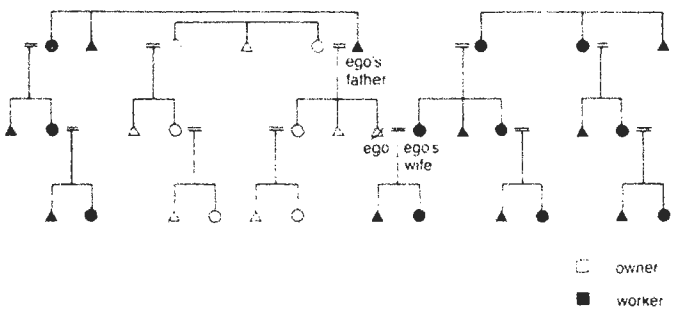


Figure 2. The primary "owners" and "workers" at ego's death.

The organization of the burial and the following exchanges falls to the owners, but, unlike the workers, they are forbidden to tough the corpse or be involved in the digging of the grave or transport of the body to the grave site. Workers, but not owners, will shave their heads, blacken their skin or put on mourning clothes to publicly demonstrate their grief. Some who are more closely related my also give up "good food" for the mourning period.

Owners "have the onerous task of giving away their resources, such as yams, pigs, and stone axe-blades, the traditional male valuables, as well as skirts and bundles of banana leaves, the valuables of women. The member of [the deceased's] matrilineage must repay all those members of other matrilineages who were close to him during his life, including his friends, allies, wives, and children"(37). The owners "pay" the workers for keeping public mourning taboos, attending to the body and the grave, and for their role in the deceased's life, as members of a different matrilineage.

The first of these exchanges occurs the day after the burial. "Here, for the first time, the owners demonstrate their strength and the vitality of their matrilineage" (Weiner:46). In this exchange the workers are paid with yams, taro, and small amounts of money, but the actual amount and items depend on the status of the person and their relation to the deceased. After the death of Uwelasi, "an old but powerful chief"(33), Weiner sat with the mourners all night. At the first exchange she was given "a *kuvi* yam (about three fee long) and fifty cents, which everyone said was a great honor"(45). For this, and every distribution, the owners call on all their supporters, even those who may not be actual members of the deceased's matrilineage, such as his married children, the children of men who are owners, and the dead person's father's brother's children, and their children.

In addition to this exchange, the matrilineal kin of the surviving spouse present the owners with men's valuables, such as stone axe-blades, clay pots, large decorated shells, and perhaps even money. "These valuables are given as a 'compensation payment' for their lack of care in allowing the death to occur"(47). Also, the next day is another exchange featuring women's valuables, bundles of banana leaves. These are given to all the workers who will observe mourning taboos for the next several months. "This distribution is only a prelude to the much larger distribution held four to six months later, when all the workers will be handsomely repaid with large numbers of bundles and skirts that end the formal mourning period"(Weiner:48).

Birth, Youth and Marriage

Weiner shows that the extensive work of mourning and the "expenditure of vast amounts of wealth" are not only an "attempt to make some part of the dead person

survive for the living", but also "an indication that the work of attending to the growth and development of the person has not been in vain"(50). They are a tribute to the creation of "the social person" who is shaped, not only by members of their own matrilineage, but by the work of other "outsiders", such as a child's father, the father's matrilineal kin, and a person's affinial kin.

Throughout a child's life, objects represent significant stages of growth and maturity, social status and power. For example, a child's father, who is a member of a different matrilineage, plays an important role in the physical care and also in increasing the potential of the child. "Men not only must provide food for their children but also are responsible for enhancing their children's beauty. When an infant is only a few months old, is still naked, and only beginning to eat a bit of yam, the baby is decorated with shells by its father to make it socially 'beautiful'"(Weiner:59). These shells are in the form of necklaces and earrings, symbolizing the political power and wealth of the father, as well as the child's own potential.

The value of the necklaces children wear is directly related to kula shells, for they are made from the same shell as the kula necklaces. If a man has access to many kula necklaces he can afford to restring the shells into a shorter version for his child. "Because shells are ranked according to their value, the kind a man has indicates his wealth and his political connections with other men"(60). Just as important, but holding a different shade of meaning, are the tortoise-shell earrings a child wears. These decorations show not only the father's wealth, but are also an indication of his involvement in his child's life. Weiner recounts the story of a young, unmarried woman whose daughter "had more shells thrust into her earlobes than any other child in the

village"(61). Though the child had no father, the mother's uncle gave the child earrings to remove some of the shame. "Now, at least publicly, no one could point a finger at her daughter and say the painful and humiliating word that means you have no father"(60).

These shell decorations show the importance of a child's father's matrilineal kin. Weiner also points out that they "underscore the fundamental dynamics of Trobriand social interaction"(63). When a father works hard for his children, they in turn, will work hard for him in the future. Engaging other people to work for you, attracting lovers and kula partners, securing political alliances requires hard work and delicate negotiation, as well as the influence of magic. "The ability to influence the mind of someone else when the minds of others are perceived to be inviolate must be worked at continually, and not every one is successful"(63). These skills are developed over a lifetime, beginning with the search for sexual partners and spouses and culminating in the pursuit of kula.

Not only the strength of magic, but also generosity in payment, gifts, and in repaying debt have a large influence over a person's aptitude for playing these social games, which have such large repercussions. Giving is an important part of Trobriand society. Weiner explains, "Giving things communicates a person's desires and plans, but it also may be an attempt to control others by establishing a debt. A villager who brings yams to someone, in my informants' words, wants 'to sweeten his thoughts' or 'to turn her mind'. Each act of giving is at once a pledge of caring and an act of obligating another person"(65). There is much strategy and change involved, even between kin. A man may give a gift of yams, but if they are poor in quality, the receiver knows that the giver gave them grudgingly and may have ill feelings towards them.

For adolescents, learning to play the game of influencing others to meet your

desires is a main occupation. However, because adults control material wealth, youth do not have access to yams, shells, or such to give. They must communicate their desires and learn to sway someone's mind using their own physical and social beauty, clothing, decorations, and magic (66). Love magic, practiced by adult women for their brother's children, is chanted into betel or tobacco, which is exchanged frequently between lovers. According to Weiner, these are important years for developing skills that will be beneficial in the future. "It is the first step toward entering the adult world of strategies, where the line between influencing others while not allowing others to gain control of oneself must be carefully learned"(71).

Marriage is an important political step for a girl, as well as the end of adolescent ventures. The choice of husband is of extreme importance to a girl's family, especially her mother and mother's brother, because her husband's kin will play an important role in strengthening the matrilineage. Though there is no wedding ceremony, as in western culture, there is an important event that makes a marriage official.

There is a taboo against lovers being seen together in the same house or eating food together. They will go at great lengths to avoid this. On young woman, Mary, told Weiner of a time she overslept at her lover's house and had to wait until later in the day when she could slip out unnoticed to return home and get something to eat (72). This strict taboo exists because of the manner in which a couple becomes husband and wife. "On day, instead of leaving her lover's house before sunrise, the young woman stays in his hamlet. In the morning, the two sit together and wait for the bride's mother to bring them cooked yams...When she and her lover eat these yams together, the marriage is officially recognized"(Weiner:77). Along with this ceremony, there are several

exchanges made between the kin of each spouse.

First, the sister of the new husband brings three long skirts to the bride. These are tried on by the bride and cut to the appropriate length for a married woman: just below the knee. Along with this, the new couple removes their red shell necklaces, a signal that they are no longer looking for lovers (Weiner:78).

The second set of exchanges is between the bride and grooms kin. Her father and mother's brother make a large presentation of raw yams from their own gardens and those of members of their matrilineages. The husband's father and mother's brother will give in return hard valuables such as stone axe-blades, a kula shell, or if these are too difficult to come by, large clay pots or money(86). Each member of the bride's family who contributed yams will receive a valuable. "These valuables honor the marriage, creating an obligation on the part of the bride's kinsmen to take care of her husband"(87). For example, her kin, specifically her brother, will make a yam garden for her and is the one who will build a yam house for his sister's husband. If this relationship is poor, a many man never acquire more than a little political and social power.

Yams and skirts play an important role in the life of all adults, they are objects that are culturally significant, carrying the power to create bonds between unrelated people, express political influence, and repay debt. The use of these resources will determine the couple's future prosperity. Yams are wealth. As one villager, Bweneyeya, told Weiner, "If a man has yams her can find anything he needs"(86) and to amass large amounts of yams a man cannot grow them himself, but must be given them by family and allies. Yams cannot be replaced by other forms a wealth, for they play many roles in Trobriand society.

> When Bweneyeya told me that a man can find anything he needs with yams, I first thought that he meant all the material things that yams can buy. But yams indicate much more than mere purchasing power, for they are the objects that transmit rights to land, property, protection, and allies. Yams secure places to life and garden land to use. Yams mark the transition from the sexuality of adolescents in to marriage. With yams, villagers no longer need to influence each other only through the beauty of their bodies. The beauty and power of yams now express desire, intention and political seduction. With marriage, the political career of husband and wife begins with the displays of yams marked for them through the labor of other men. Yet that labor is only the beginning; with time, hard work, and the strong continued support of a man's wife and her kin, his political potential is given public recognition when his wife's brother builds him a yam house. That structure documents his generosity and capabilities, what Trobrianders call a man's "good customs." The yam house also proclaims a woman's value both to her husband and to her own matrilineage (Weiner:95).

Many objects, not just yams, hold greater importance in Trobriand society than their utilitarian use may imply. Yams eventually rot, they cannot be accumulated as may money in a bank account. Their value rests, not in their longevity, but in the way they mould relationships and influence the actions of others. Other objects, such as women's skirts, betel nut, stone axe-blades, clay pots, and kula shells also function in a wider role than may be suggested by face-value. And, as we shall see, women's wealth in the form of banana bundles and brightly dyed skirts also hold great value and represent strength and power at such a crucial time as death.

Death and Women's Mortuary Distributions

The official mourning period does not end until the final distribution of women's wealth. Regardless of when the death occurred, this distribution (*lisaladabu*) of banana leaf bundles and brightly dyed skirts will only take place during one time of year: the

yam harvest (Weiner:116). The female owners, or the deceased's kinswomen, organize this event, and each, with the help of other women related to the dead person through marriage, collects huge amounts of women's wealth. This wealth is given away to repay those workers who participated in the funeral and/or observed mourning taboos. A mortuary distribution can last from five to eight hours, and payment is made for services rendered in as many as seventeen categories of mourning taboos and tasks (131).

Though a woman can make her own banana leaf bundles, she can never make enough by herself to accommodate the large number needed for mortuary distributions. Weiner explains that "The key to finding large amounts of bundles is a woman's husband"(119). A woman's husband will take his wealth, in the form of a pig, yams, and other objects, to "buy" bundles from others. Weiner sites an example where a man exchanged a pig for 30,000 new bundles (120). Some will even use money to buy trade store goods such as rice, tobacco, and canned foods, which will then be sold to other women for their bundles. A man helps his wife find bundles even though the deceased is not of his own matrilineage. This is because every year he receives yams from his wife's brother. "By giving yams each year to his sister, a man secures women's wealth form someone in another matrilineage for his own matrilineage. In this way the exchange relationship between yams and bundles and the circulation of bundles as a limited currency operate within a system of precise checks and balances" (Weiner: 120).

Giving yams creates debt that can only be repaid in bundles. Unlike yams, however, bundles remove debt and can "repay" a person for the time, wealth and support they may have giving over the lifetime of the deceased (Weiner:122). As you can imagine, the people who received the largest payment of women's wealth are the dead

person's spouse and father, the two major "outsiders" in every person's life. "The woman who overturns the largest number of baskets to distribute more wealth than anyone else is called 'a wealthy woman.' It is she who proclaims the political message that, as with a chief, expresses her power. She, too, makes the larger claim that her matrilineage is strong" (Weiner:117).

The exertions and work that occur when a member of any matrilineage dies are much more complex and costly than any other event, even more so than birth and marriage. These exchanges serve two major purposes: to show the strength and independence of a matrilineage and the recognition or all the multifarious relationships a person creates throughout their life. Ultimately, they show "who one is" and "where one belongs" (Weiner:135). "To make unassailable who one is politically and where one belongs ancestrally, one must establish some measure of control over others outside the matrilineage" (135). For men this is accomplished through yams and kula.

For women this is done through mortuary distributions, where she shows in a very profound way who she is, and she also shows where everyone else belongs (123). "The day mars a political challenge enacted by women to those who thing that the matrilineage owners are weak. By distributing enough wealth to look strong, the women of the matrilineage 'untie' the dead person from all her or his relationships, paying back each villager for the care and attention that constituted the relationship, so that with the close of the bundle distribution, the deceased is separated from all past obligations" (Weiner:135).

Conclusion

Objects connect villagers, creating ties across matrilineal boundaries, binding together a couple and their kin, expressing corporate and individual identity. We all tend to give meaning to objects beyond their cost in materials or labor, objects mark relationships, political or social status, and special events in life. Weiner sites such examples (159) as wedding bands, grave markers, old worn-out jeans, a man's earring, heirlooms, and cherished treasures from childhood.

Trobrianders too have objects that hold this kind of symbolism and significance. As we have seen yams, banana leaves, and certain shell necklaces and armbands hold deep significance and power. "These are the things that cross boundaries between people, that connect one villager socially and political with another. Malinowski wondered why men give so much attention to their yam displays. Yams, we now know, are the objects that create relatedness as the cross clan boundaries" creating relationships, securing land rights, and other types of wealth (Weiner: 159-160). Men's and women's wealth are used to "show who you are and where you belong", to expand your ability to influence others and achieve renown.

The Art of Kula

Now we move to a new subject, one that may at first seem unrelated to the previous discussion: the art of kula and specifically the splashboards or *lagim* of kula canoes. While the carvings and colors that adorn a kula canoe seem far from the life cycle of villagers and the power of objects to influence others, they are closer than may appear at first glance.

Shirley F. Campbell, in her wonderful and insightful book, *The Art of Kula*, explores the intricate world of aesthetics and iconography on the prow boards of each kula canoe. These boards serve as more than mere protection from splashing waves. They are an essential element of a successful kula trip and exchange, invoking rich symbolism embedded deep in Trobriand culture to insure a swift and safe ocean voyage, and perhaps more important, exercising influence over one's kula partners, compelling them to give away all their valuables. Underlying this is another layer of symbolism reflecting Trobrianders' conception of the relationship between women and men and their competing spheres.

Before getting into the specifics, a brief consideration of ethnographic art, also called folk or native art, is necessary. Campbell gives the value of studying the art of a culture as "a valuable means of providing insight into the ways people perceive their environment, how they break it down into simple line and shape to capture the formal properties of a shared cultural code in a meaningful world" (70). Art is more than something we hang on our walls. It is a part of how we express our worldview and the essentials of our lives.

Fine art expresses an entirely different view of the world than ethnographic art, as well as being created for a different audience. All art, according to the folklorist Barre Toelken, is "culture centered, because all artists use the perspectives, languages, assumptions, and traditions of their cultures in the development of taste and articulation" (221). This view takes us away from the perspective of art as merely something nice to look at, and leads us to view art as a form of communicating. Even if art is created for a

functional use, as are canoe prow and splashboards in the Trobriand Islands, they can hold a deeper meaning beyond their function.

To go back to Toelken, traditional art is not about innovation, as fine art may be. It is about expressing community values and traditional standards. This is not to avoid the fact that art changes over time. But with time and change comes the removal of unimportant themes and inessential elements and a focus on expressing "the soul of the group" carrying within the graphical representations "the compacted wisdom of the past" which are "designed in terms of the group's own ongoing aesthetics" (222).

Campbell voices a similar view. Speaking of Trobriand art she says, "The graphic system does not exist in isolation, however. Unlike Western concepts of art which often view it as something that can exist for its own sake, and be placed in institutions devoted to its display, in most other societies art is created for specific contexts and fulfils particular functions....The art of kula is a dynamic medium of communication in which the associated systems of meaning are integrated with others to reflect Vakutan spheres of social experience" (193). In approaching art as a significant form of expression for a culture we can glean much knowledge about a culture from its art system.

One important thing to note is that Campbell did her work on the island of Vakuta, unlike Malinowski and Weiner who were on Kiriwina. Vakuta is just south of Kiriwina and is included in the Trobriand group. In the following discussing there may be regional differences in specifics of art or kula, but in general the concepts apply to all islands in the Kula District.

The Anatomy of a Canoe, *lagim* and *tabuya*

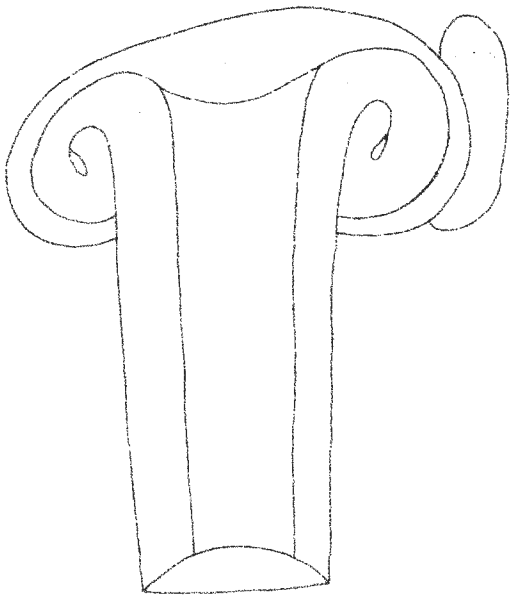
The outrigger canoe used for kula has only one outrigger, resulting in no fixed stern or bow. The "front" of the canoe is thus determined by the direction of the wind. This arrangement necessitates that each end be able to function as the front end, producing a canoe with essentially symmetric ends, though they are distinguished from each other linguistically, conceptually, and physically (Campbell:73).

There are four boards on each canoe: a prowboard (*tabuya*) and a splashboard (*lagim*)on each end. The splashboard functions as a vertical element, standing tall and protecting the canoe from waves. The prowboard in physically shaped like half the splashboard, placed perpendicular to the splashboard and creating a long, horizontal element, which cuts through the water as the canoe moves forward.

The set placed with the outrigger to the left is the *dogina* end, while the other is called the *uuna* end. There are a few differences in the carving of each board, based on its position. The *uuna* prowboard has perforations along the bottom that do not occur on the *dogina* prowboard. The larger loop or wing of the splashboard is always positioned over the outrigger. In *Gigibori*, a magazine of Papua New Guinea cultures, Chief Narubutal discusses fourteen *lagim* from a collection. Here he distinguishes between "stern" and "prow" based on which wing is larger, left or right (1975:1). Thus a larger loop on the left is the stern, which Campbell would call the *dogina lagim*, and a larger loop on the right he calls prow, but she would label *uuna lagim*.

The design elements of the *lagim* and *tabuya* are related in most areas but differ in the arrangement of some forms. For this reason, the focus of the remainder of the discussion will be the *lagim* forms, animals, colors, and meaning.

The *lagim* is conceptually divided into five areas that are discussed using body part names. Campbell has numbered them according to the order in which they are generally carved. Thus, section one is the head, two and three are the arms or wings, four is the body or chest, and five, for the *lagim* has no specific name and is an optional element (75). Each section has specific forms that occur within it and others that are not represented there. Section 4 is the freest and allows for the carver to use his own creativity to make the board unique.



(Weiner:138)

Men who become carvers go through extensive training and apprenticeship, it becomes a life long pursuit, much as kula is for many men. In this training they are given the necessary knowledge and magic needed to execute an effective and pleasing carving. (This topic is discussed extensively in Part I of her book.) Aesthetics are judged primarily on "the quality of line construction, the correct arrangement of representational elements and the correct 'paths' for the colours" (Campbell:76). Different styles and schools of carving, called *sopila,* can be identified if you know the elements to attend to. "A

particular artistic style can be distinguished from others through visibly discernible differences in the shape, contour, emphasis, depth and quality of line" (Campbell:70).

In the Gigibori articles, the chief discussing several *lagim* and *tabuya* is able to determine each piece's place of origin and, in some cases, even name the man who may have carved it because of these specific stylistic differences. This is particularly manifest in the article from 1979, piece number one. "This canoe prow came from Vakuta. This is evident from the *sakwab* designs, which run along the central axis from top to bottom of the canoe prow. In Kiliwila these akwab (they represent coconut husks, drying in the sun) curl upwards; in Vakuta they curl downwards" (40).

The Kabitam Forms and Animals

Campbell defines *kabitam* as "a high order of knowledge achieved through magic and training" (216). A man who has trained for years under another man who carves kula boards will receive *kabitam* and all the necessary magical and technical preparations (57). He learns the forms, colors, meanings, aesthetics, and magic associated with carving. Thus, when discussing these elements, she labels them the *kabitam* forms or animals, and so on, distinguishing them as a special form of knowledge possessed by only a few members of each community.

The basic forms used in carving the *lagim* and *tabuya* fall, according to Campbell, into three categories. She based this division on "the formal properties that distinguish the in the spatial orientation. For example, some forms appear to be the principal markers between sections...Other forms are contained within these while still others appear around and between them" (76). Category A forms, consisting of five forms, each

with three or more variations, are the forms that define a section or act as the main design within a section (77). These forms are mostly variations of swirls, S-curves, and volutes.

Category B forms appear in and around the borders of category A forms. Category A forms are specific to an area, but not those in B, for they may occur anywhere. There are four basic forms in this category, each having two or more variations (80). They range from simple curves and concentric circles to triangles.

Category C forms are all associated with the color black, a significance that will be discussed later. There are ten distinct C forms but none of them have variations, as they are dictated by the other elements around them. Category C forms also include some forms that are actual holes in the wood, carved for structural purposes such as attaching the board to the canoe. (82-83). These forms are mostly self-contained polygons and curvilinear shapes.

Campbell further defines these forms as versatile (Category A), restricted (B), and fixed (C), based on the number of variations each form has, their frequency, and those with the greatest density of meaning. "A hierarchy seems to emerge with some designs delineating and apparently dominating the available spaces on the boards while others emphasise, repeat or emerge from them" (87). The forms themselves serve as the starting point for a more in-depth analysis of the meaning of kula art. Now we have individual units that can be broken down and their meaning, color, and purpose discussed.

Each form can also be identified with a specific creature, plant, or object, giving the forms meaning beyond their shape and placement on the board. However, the forms may not be actual iconic representations of the animal that they symbolize, but rather "the system encodes attributes of the animal relevant to a Vakutan rationale for idealising

certain animals, or, more specifically, certain *features* of animals in association with the aims of kula" (Campbell: 91). These features are qualities of movement, typical behavior, or aesthetics that are seen as qualities necessary for successful kula.

As an example, lets look at several of the animals in the *kabitam* repertoire whose characteristics are invoked for successful kula. On the *lagim*, delineating sections 2 and 3, is the butterfly or *beba*. This animal corresponds to form A4 (see chart below). The shape may be representing the butterfly's wings, because "the butterfly moves effortlessly upon the currents of the wind and it is this ability that they hope will be emulated by the outrigger canoe" (Campbell: 95). Another way to look at this form is as representing the antennae of a butterfly. Campbell explains that both explanations are valid as Vakutans consider antennae to be "an important part of the butterfly's flying apparatus, as well as being instrumental to its intelligence (particularly in relation to flight)" (95). There are many possible layers of interpretation, which gives more depth to the meaning of each form.

Other important animals incorporated into the art of the *lagim* are the *doka*, *boi*, *tokwalu*, and *ubwara*. Although Campbell discusses twelve other plants, animals, and such which are utilized in the repertoire of a carver and important to the carving of each *lagim* and *tabuya*, they will not be discussed here.

The *doka* is an imaginary animal that has no counterpart in the natural world. There are several forms that correspond with this animal, including A3.2, A3.4, A4, and B3.2 (see chart). The *doka* is believed to be very wise, though Campbell's informants sometimes gave her contradictory information. "Some people said that the *doka* is a flying 'animal' with the head of a bird and the body of a snake. Others said it lives at sea,

while there were those who claimed the *doka* is really a human, but one that can fly" (97). The *doka* is related to thought and is believed to help the carver produce correct carvings.

The *boi*, unlike the *doka*, is an actual natural animal, the egret. However, the two names often refer to the same form. "Indeed, *boi* is the second name for *doka* so that the form has both a conceptual reference as well as an 'animal' namesake" (Campbell:98). The egret is also considered wise, as well as possessing its own magic. "A recurring characterization of this animal is that 'It strikes wisely and gets its fish. However, when the *boi* misses, it goes into the forest and performs its *kaimwasila* magic. It then returns to the water and resumes fishing.' In this regard, the *boi* is likened to men who also have to perform magic in order to succeed at their work " (Campbell: 141).

The *tokwalu* appears in section 1 of the *lagim* and represents humanity. (Campbell:106). "The positions of 'mankind', represented by the *tokwalu*, and the *boi*, are bolstered by the close proximity of the *doka* signifying wise thought. In a kind of ironic twist, these representations will turn against the crew and destroy them should the latter endanger the outrigger canoe" (Campbell 141).

Form B1.2 and B1.3 are the *ubwara*. These perfectly round concentric circles, unlike previously discussed animals, do not invoke a specific desired attribute, but rather an aesthetic principle. Campbell points out that this design is called the same name as uncultivated yams in Vakuta, but named *susawiwi* or a snail on Kiriwina. "It is the shape of the 'animal' which inspires Trobriand aesthetics; roundness with an internal order consisting of a spiral...or concentric circles...This example illustrates the level at which the labeling system operates. It is not that Vakutans (or Kiriwinans) are concerned to

represent a wild yam or garden snail. Rather they are focused upon representing a particular attribute" (107). The aim is not to represent the natural world, but to utilize specific characteristics that will aid in the pursuit of kula and success over one's partners.

The Meaning of Kabitam

Form		Colour	Body part	Animal
	A1.2	white with red repetition		
	A1.3	white with red repetition	mouth	
	A2.2	white with red repetition		*karawa*
	A3.1	white		*dodoleta*
	A3.2	white with red repetition	head with eye and beak	*boi/doka*
	A3.3	white	head/body eye and beak	*sawala*
	A3.4	white	head with eye and beak	*doka*
	A4	white, red, and black	head, neck, and beak – wing/arm	*beba, boi/doka*
	A5	white, red and black	entire body	*tokwaku*
	B1.1	white	eye	*duduwa*
	B1.2	white and red		*ubwara*
	B1.3	white, red and black		
	B2.1	white		*ginareu*
	B2.2	white		*dudoleta*
	B3.1	white		*kaidada*
	B3.2	white	head/eye	*boi, doka* or *weku*
	B4.1	white		*taregesi*
	C4	black		
	C5	black		
	C6	alternating black and red		
	C7	black		
	C8	black		
	C9	black		

Form, representation, colour and body-part terminology of the *lagim*

(Weiner:139)

As the chart above shows, specific colors are associated with each form. There are only three colors used on kula prow and splashboards: white, red, and black. Paint is an essential portion of every *lagim* or *tabuya*. Before each kula expedition fresh paint is

applied, creating a bold, vivid impression. While each element of the graphic system holds symbolic importance, transferring the desired characteristics and power of each 'animal' and channeling it for the purpose of kula, the importance color represents another layer of meaning, independent of the forms.

Colors and their Meanings

In analyzing the meaning of these colors, Weiner's book is particularly important. She charted to life of islanders, from birth, through adolescence and entrance into the adult world through marriage, and finally death. From one view the colors can be seen as reflecting this process: white is birth, red is adolescences, and black is maturity and death. Campbell observes that this would be a misconstrued perspective, for Vakutans do not see red as transitional, or any color as prominent over another. "As with the cyclical forces of life, the colour triad symbolizes the transitional nature of each stage, passing inevitably through an eternal process of birth, death and rebirth...[there is] no beginning point moving relentlessly to an end point. The process is ongoing" (125).

Birth is associated with the color white. Much as in western thought, white is pure and clean. This color is applied only on the surface of the boards, the level that is the least carved, or worked(Campbell: 118). White is associated with things that are not dangerous or safe, such as new kula shell, or one with little history. It is also connected with women in their first pregnancy and new babies who have yet to be marred by life's experiences. "White, although pure and uncontaminated, evokes feelings of security, but in so doing seems less exciting" (Campbell:120). Each color is two edged, with positive and negative associations. In this case, white is a bit of a paradox, for its very safety makes it undesirable, for no one achieves fame with little risk.

As childhood is fleeting, white cannot be a permanent state. Through the accumulation of life experiences a person becomes 'red' and eventually 'black'. Red is associated with attraction and sexual desire. "Young unmarried women who are sexually available wear very short red skirts to attract partners" (Campbell:120). Red is also the color associated with the highest ranked kula valuables. Red is not associated with any particular form on the canoe prow and splashboards, but is painted on 'paths' that emphasize the white forms. Youth and beauty may seem to have the upper hand in all things, but Vakutans believe that "mature men have the advantage of experience and knowledge" (Campbell:122). In this way, red must become black, as white will not remain pure. Though youth is seen as an exciting time, when boys and girls learn strategies for influencing others, their lack of experience places them below those adults who are at the prime of their lives.

Black is an ambiguous color. Though it is associated with death and decay, "in other contexts it is positively valued for its representation of maturity, the possession of knowledge and the power associated with knowledge" (Campbell:123). In this same way, black on a yam may represent ripeness or decay, depending on its context: the inside or the skin. Black can be a desired stage, for it is the stage of "social maturity" and the possession of "knowledge, magic and social status" (Campbell:125). As mentioned earlier, each color has a dual meaning, much as each stage of life contains positive and negative elements.

These colors demonstrate another level at which meaning is embedded into the art of kula. Kula is about acquiring fame and renown. To do this men must call upon their

own personal prowess and ability to influence another using their physical and social beauty, and also the knowledge and magic they have accumulated through their lives.

Layers of Meaning

In the first part of her book, Campbell dissects each element of the art of kula. Each layer of meaning can be seen as a system in and of itself. For the last section, however, she strives to show how these layers are connected, creating new and multidimensional meanings. "Meaning is not merely transmitted through the label or colour association attached to a simple design form. The lines worked into the carved surface of the prow and splashboard provide layers of meaning that are revealed by exploring the ways in which the formal components are organized in relation to each other: their specific orientations, colour associations and the multiple references encoded in the various representational components" (127).

Her analysis of the meanings embedded in the splashboard alone takes up seven pages. For brevity's sake, here we will only consider the implications of these interconnections for section 1 of the *lagim*. This section is monopolized by the *tokwalu*, and the *boi/doka*. The relationship of these three was discussed earlier. The significance of the *tokwalu* figure being represented in section 1 is associated with the body part label this section is named: the head.

> "As regard the tokwalu, it is possible that at one level the figure represents a reincarnated ancestor at the head of a *dala* woman waiting to be carried to the womb. Since much of the symbolism of kula is concerned with men engaged in the reproduction of male wealth through their relationships with male partners, it would not be surprising if the representation of the *tokwalu* at the

'head' of the splashboard communicated these messages at some level, although Vakutans never articulated this" (141).

All colors are represented in this section, in one way symbolizing the regeneration of a matrilineage, but in the world of kula, the regeneration of fame and male wealth through kula.

The main point of this analysis is not to show that native art has meaning and is not just something pretty to look at. Campbell's goal is to show that the repertoire of *kabitam* carvings and colors are essential players in the pursuit of kula. "The design units on the kula prow and splashboards are fundamentally about the representation of desired characteristics seen in the natural world to be 'successful'. The 'animals' used for representation on the boards are enlisted for the success of a kula expedition. This is marked by the boat's ability to negotiate the dangerous open sea, as well as the board's ability to woo kula partners and bring home shell valuables"(149).

Ultimately, kula is about men separating themselves from their duties as a member of a matrilineage and achieving individual fame. "In attempting to extricate their personal names from a corporate identity defined by women, men enlist symbols of male success. These symbols, in their various contexts, represent goals men try to achieve so as to succeed in the acquisition of status and renown...it is the canoe, together with its elaborately carved and painted boards, that silently transmits the force of these symbols" (Campbell:189). The art of kula incorporates concepts of beauty, wisdom, power and mobility, along with color symbolism and the concept of movement from birth to death and rebirth to achieve the particular goals of kula. Just as women use objects of wealth to display the strength of their matrilineage, and children's adornments represent

their potential social beauty, the objects of kula communicate a message of many meanings, demonstrating the dynamics of Trobriand life and the complex ways in which men and women strive to achieve immortality and fame.

Final Thoughts

With the yoking of these three books new perspective can be gained on the life of Trobriand Islanders and their endless pursuit of fame through kula. Finally, we have come full circle and can understand this artifact, the *lagim*, in it's correct context. The creation of a kula canoe and the boards that adorn it are more than mere decoration. They are a part of the entire system, expressing Trobriand ideology and the cultural significance of objects as a means of influence over others.

Malinowski's groundbreaking work demonstrated that such a surprisingly complex and extensive institution as the kula does have underlying meaning and function. The importance of the women's mortuary distribution and the regeneration of matrilineality, and the interdependence of women's wealth and men's wealth, including their kula shells was the main focus of Annette Weiner's book. It not only filled in some of the blanks left by Malinowski, but exposed an intriguing element of Trobriand, an indeed, all society: the power of objects to influence others and shape our cultural world. For Trobrianders certain items become elements of exchange and influence, connecting people beyond ties of kinship. *The Art of Kula* ties it all together in the microcosm of a beautifully carved *lagim*. The world of kula and the world of born, while at odds in many ways, balance each other, men striving for individual fame and immortality despite being tied to their matrilineage through the obligation of their resources.

Many believed that the practice of kula exchange would die out with time and increased Western influence in the Trobriand Islands. This had not been the case. Kula has thrived and adapted to the changing world, much as the islanders themselves have. In a reflection of this unending vivacity and resilience, anthropology has not ceased its interest in this small corner of the world, despite decades of continued research. Though, in the end, we look to our past to find our purposes. As Malinowski poignantly concluded in *Argonauts*, "Though it may be given to us for a moment to enter into the soul of a savage and through his eyes to look at the outer world and feel ourselves what it must feel to *him* to be himself-yet our final goal is to enrich and deepen our own world's vision, to understand our own nature and to make it finer, intellectually and artistically."